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AT HOME
WITH
THE PATAGONIANS.

CHAPTER I.

FROM THE STRAITS TO SANTA CRUZ.

Journey Planned—Preparations—Passage from Stanley—The Straits—First Footsteps in Patagonia—The Narrows—Punta Arenas—Commandante Viel—The Colony—The Town—Chilotes and Convicts—Resources—Visit to the Coal Bed—Lieut. Gallegos—The Start—Rio Chaunco—The Patagonian Pampas—Our Party—Cabecera del Mar—Oazy Harbour—A Useless Chase—A Fireless Night—Volcanic Hills—Pampa Yarns—Rio Gallegos—First Indians—Sam Slick—Rio Cuheyli—Meeting with Tehuelches—Caravan of Women—'Anglish' Politeness—Desert—Santa Cruz at last.

122 IN April, 1869, chance took me to our remote colony of the Falkland Islands, with the purpose of taking thence a passage to Buenos Ayres to arrange some business matters. During my stay in the settlement, the coast of Patagonia, in the survey of which H.M.S. Nassau was then engaged, formed a frequent topic of conversation. I had formerly, when stationed on the south-east coast of America, read with delight Mr. Darwin's work on South America, as well as Fitzroy's admirable Narrative of the Voyage of the Beagle, and had ever since entertained a strong desire to penetrate if possible the little-known interior of the country. Now,

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the southern part of Tierra del Fuego, came into sight, 133
appearing to rise out of the water, ninety miles distant, if
not more. Steaming along the coast through numerous beds [137]
of the characteristic kelp seaweed, which in the most forcible
way attracted our attention, by fouling the screw, and hold-
ing the ship as if anchored for about an hour, we passed
Cape Negro, and opened completely different scenery. In-
stead of undulating plains, hills thickly wooded were seen;
at the foot of one of which, on a low piece of flat ground,
numerous horsemen, dressed in gay-coloured ponchos, were
visible, careering about.

It was the afternoon of Sunday, which in all Spanish 200
South American countries is a gala day, more or less appro-
priated to horse-racing. However, the sight of a steamer
appeared to cause a diversion, and, in fact, a general race
to the settlement ensued, all being apparently anxious
for anything new or strange. The anchor was soon
dropped, near an American schooner lying off the Sandy
Point, from which the Chilian settlement of Punta Arenas
derives its name.

There was no sign of the Nassau, then engaged in the
survey of the Straits, which we had hoped to find in this
anchorage; but from the Chilian officer, who speedily boarded
us, we learned that she had sailed to the westward a day or
two before our arrival, and was expected to return imme-
diately. The results of the careful observations made by
Mr. Cunningham, of the scenery and natural history of the
Straits, have appeared while these pages were in preparation
for the press; and it affords me pleasure to refer such as
desire more scientific accounts of the botany and zoology, at
least of Southern Patagonia, than it was in my power to
obtain, to his wo...

My own object in visiting Punta Arenas was to proceed 122
thence to Santa Cruz with the Indians, or in whatever way
might prove feasible; but, in truth, it was by no means clear
to my mind how it was to be accomplished; it was, therefore,

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122 with great relief that I learned from the Chilian lieutenant that a small expedition was about to be despatched by the governor to Santa Cruz in pursuit of some runaways from among the deserters who were serving their term of punishment in the colony. He suggested that the Commandante would, doubtless, give permission to accompany this party; and, without delay, I accompanied him on shore, and was introduced to Commandante Señor Viel.

Nothing could exceed the kindness and courtesy with which the Commandante entered into my plans; he at once not only gave me permission to accompany the party, but, unasked, offered me the use of a horse, and told me not to trouble myself about the commissariat for the road. It was possible, however, that the deserters might be overtaken in the Pampas, in which case the party would return without proceeding as far as Santa Cruz; he therefore advised me to secure the services of some one acquainted with the route, who could act as guide in the event of having to proceed without the rest of our companions.

I was afterwards introduced to Señora Viel, a fair Limena possessing all the proverbial charms of the ladies of Lima, and who bemoaned bitterly the isolation and ennui of life at Punta Arenas; she had literally no equals of her own sex, and scarcely any of the other to speak to. Señor Viel had formerly commanded a Chilian ironclad, instead of which he had accepted the government of this distant colony; his zeal and energy in discharging the duties of his office were unceasing, and his naval habits asserted themselves in the strictness of discipline maintained, which was absolutely necessary to keep in order the motley population. But as a residence, viewed from a social point of view, Punta Arenas must have been unimaginably dull. The Commandante kindly pressed me to make his house my home, promising quarters for the night—which his own limited accommodation could not supply—in an adjacent house. So after two days, agreeably spent in the interchange of courtesies and

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visits, I bade adieu to my shipmates, who were to sail at daylight for the Western Straits, and removed myself and traps to a wooden house close to the Cuartel, the quarters of Don Centeno, the engineer in charge of the Government works. The next morning, accompanied by Captain Cushing, of the schooner Rippling Wave, I set out to procure some few necessary supplies, and make inquiries for a guide. We bent our steps to the store of a man named Guillermo, and after purchasing tobacco and other necessaries, the talk turned on gold, of which Don Guillermo showed us some specimens, obtained from the banks of a neighbouring stream. One of the crew of the Rippling Wave grew greatly excited and exclaimed, 'Ah, that's the stuff we used to grub up in a creek in California; I guess if the old boat lays her bones on these here shores, I'll stop and turn to digging again.' Hanging up in the store were some Indian bolas and a belt made of beads, studded with silver bosses, which the owner informed me was a woman's girdle, and, with the bolas, had been left in pawn by the Indians. They had not, however, visited the colony, at least for trading purposes, for several months, as they had taken umbrage about a dispute between a Chilian and an Indian, in which they considered their comrade to have been treated with injustice. The party described by Mr. Cunninghame evidently arrived with doubtful intentions, and the tact displayed by Señor Viel removed their resentment. This information explained what had previously mystified me, viz., that nothing was to be seen or heard of the Indians with whom I had hoped to make acquaintance. My good fortune in arriving on the eve of the departure of the expedition, and the Commandante's courtesy, were now even more keenly appreciated by me, as otherwise I should have been simply stranded in Punta Arenas. The guide difficulty was not long of solution, although, from the natural dislike of most of the unofficial population to take part in the recapture of runaways, it had seemed rather perplexing. After we had quitted the store, we were accosted

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[22 by a man named J'aria, who came to offer his services. A short examination of his knowledge and recommendations proving satisfactory, he was engaged on terms which certainly were far from exorbitant, and he deserves to have it recorded that he fully earned his pay. My equipments and preparations for the journey were now made complete by the thoughtful good-nature of Captain Cushing, with whom I proceeded on board his vessel, where he provided from his stores, and forced on my acceptance, several most useful articles; and it is pleasant to be able to publish my sense of the kindness received from one of our American cousins, who are always ready to sympathise with and befriend a Britisher, at least according to my experience.

A stroll of inspection round the settlement was extended to the saw-mill, not far distant, worked by water-power; where, under the direction of Mr. Wells, an American, the trees when cut down are converted into boards to build the houses that take the place of the forest. Proceeding thence to the half-cleared outskirts, we found the Commandante supervising numerous labourers, principally of the convict class, who were busily engaged in felling trees, clearing stumps, and otherwise preparing the way for the future development of the settlement.

To any one unaccustomed to frontier towns, the *coup-d'œil* of the town presented an irregular and random growth of wooden houses; but the plan which was indicated in outline was laid out after the usual Spanish-American fashion, as originally prescribed by the Council of the Indies. A main street ran near and parallel to the beach, crossing a large vacant square—the Plaza, out of which, and at regular intervals from the main street, ran other embryo streets intersecting at right angles, so that the houses, whenever they should be built, would form blocks or 'cuadras.' In the Plaza were the church and a large unfinished school-house. Chilian ideas as to the public duty of education are advanced, and the schoolmaster is a state

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become opened up, in which case, probably, other sources of mineral wealth will be discovered and made productive.

Our departure having been definitely fixed for the morrow, I proceeded to review and arrange my equipments for the journey, a list of which may gratify intending explorers of Patagonia. Two saddle-bags contained my kit and necessaries, consisting of a couple of shirts and a jersey or two, a few silk handkerchiefs, and soap, lucifer matches, writing materials, fishing lines and hooks, quinine and caustic, and a small bottle of strychnine. The armoury comprised a rifle in case complete, and two double-barrelled breech-loading pistols, hunting-knives, a small ammunition-case of unfilled cartridges, and a supply of powder. The only instrument ventured on was a small compass. My personal equipment was a shooting suit of tweed and a Scotch cap, and a most excellent pair of boots made by Thomas, to which for comfort were superadded a guanaco skin mantle, two ponchos, and a waterproof sheet. In the evening Señor Viel introduced me to my future travelling companion, Lieutenant Gallegos, who was to command our party. He was a short, thick-set man, with a dark, almost Indian complexion, and looked all over what the Commandante declared him to be, 'a man for hard work.' In his native province of Arauco he had been for many years employed in the frontier wars with the Indians, and could handle the lazo or the lance with wonderful dexterity. He spoke with great cordiality of the officers of the Nassau, and seemed well inclined to the company of one of the same service; indeed, I am strongly inclined to believe that he is introduced into the foreground of Commander Bedwell's sketch—at all events, if any reader wishes to know his appearance, the occupant of the fallen tree presents a strong resemblance to the leader of our party. Our arrangements and prospects were fully discussed; and after bidding farewell to Captain Cushing, who was to sail the next day, and to my most kind and courteous host and hostess, we parted, agreeing to meet at daylight ready for the road.

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122 At an early hour in the morning of the 19th of April I was awoke by J'aria, and with him and my small belongings proceeded to the Corral, where the horses were being caught and loaded. Here we were joined by Gallegos, and when everything was nearly ready for the start adjourned to his house close by for a cup of coffee. The Señora seemed to regard me with great commiseration, and recounted various dismal tales of the dreadful cold winds, hardships, Indians, and other disagreeables to be encountered; her consolations were cut short by the entrance of J'aria with the news that all was ready. After a parting glass of something stronger than water, we got into our saddles, and the cavalcade, consisting of Gallegos, myself, one regular soldier, three irregulars or employés of the Government, and J'aria, with twenty-one horses, left the town. As we passed the Cuartel, the guard turned out in the balcony and presented arms, and the bugler executed a musical salute. It was a fine frosty morning, and we rode on in high spirits, accompanied by two or three horsemen, who were going to spend their Sunday festa in duck shooting, and had made an early start to escort us a little way. Scarcely had we crossed the stream when one of the baggage horses kicked his load off; this was soon replaced; but when the bustle was over and the cavalcade reformed, J'aria and one of the employés, to whom I had confidingly entrusted a bottle of rum, were missing, and they did not turn up again for some time, and the bottle never again. We rode along the coast until we reached the outpost called Tres Puentes, where a narrow pass between the forest on one hand and the sea on the other, is barred by a gate-house tenanted by two men, posted there to prevent desertion; they turned out, and we lingered for a farewell chat, during which one of the sportsmen stalked and shot some ducks; at the report of his gun, the regular soldier's horse, not being used to stand fire, shied and threw him, capsizing his saddle-bags, and strewing the beach with tortillas (cakes) and coffee, with which his no

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doubt provident and thoughtful 'she' had stored them. Gallegos sat in his saddle and laughed at the scene; but as the others could not catch the horse, he gave us a proof of his dexterity with the lazo. After this little diversion we pursued our course along the beach as far as Cape Negro, where the forests terminated, and our accompanying friends bade us adieu after taking a parting glass all round; J'aria and the other absentee overtaking us in time for this part of the performance. 122

Our horses' heads were then turned from the coast in a north-north-west direction, and after half an hour's ride a halt was called for breakfast under the lee of a sheltering hill. To the southward we viewed the counter slope of the wooded hills, below which on the other side lay Punta Arenas. A thick growth of shrubs covered the ground, but beautiful glades of luxuriant pasture were visible; one of which opened just to the south of our camping-place, and others appeared east and west like oases of green. Their appearance caused me to remark that as a settler I should choose this location for my hut. Gallegos, however, replied that the pastures could not be used for the cattle of the settlement during the summer, as neither the Indians nor their own men could be trusted; the latter would desert, and the former would steal the beasts. After a pipe we remounted, and having crossed the hill we descended to the valley of a small but deep stream, called the Rio Chaunco, having forded which we ascended the opposite border slope, and entered on the Pampa, which name is universally used in Patagonia to designate the high undulating plains or plateaux, frequently intersected by valleys and ravines, or rising into successive or isolated hills, which generally occupy the crest of the country. The Indians, indeed, who know a little Castilian, apply the word Pampa indiscriminately to any tract of country hunted over by them. After a successful day's sport, and the contentment consequent on a hearty meal, they will ask with great satisfaction, 'Muy buena Pampa? No?' really meaning 133

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The Pampa we were now traversing presented an expanse/33
of undulating or rolling plains covered with a uniform growth of coarse grass interspersed with barberry bushes, and occasional lagoons in the hollows. No living creatures except ourselves appeared on the waste. To the westward the snow-clad peaks of the mountains bordering the Sarmiento Straits greeted us with an icy blast which made my thoughts longingly revert to the cozy cabin and my late shipmates, who were, no doubt, threading the intricacies of its channels. But the good guanaco mantle kept out the wind, and our motley party pushed briskly on in good order. Lieutenant Gallegos has been already introduced; as to the/22
others, J'aria was a small man, of rough exterior, of doubtful extraction, and more than doubtful antecedents, who looked fit for any business except good; but he served me most assiduously and with unlooked-for care. The soldier was a fine-looking fellow, new to the Pampas, whose carbine, which he duly carried, proved a source of great embarrassment to him; and his horse being by no means too manageable, he was considerably bothered, much to the delight of the rest. Two others were hybrids, between gauchos and sailors, having, like our marines, been equally accustomed to service *per mare, per terram;* but, like the jollies, they were unmistakably useful and good men. The las of the party was of the J'aria type. All were well mounted, and provided with a spare horse. We carried for provisions biscuit, charqui or dried meat, roasted wheat meal, and coffee and sugar, and were furnished with an unusual but welcome luxury, a small tent, underneath which we cared little for the bitter frost outside.

After riding over the Pampas for three or four hours, we/80
encamped for the night in a hollow by the side of a lagoon, having selected a suitable spot for pitching the tent on the sheltered slope, well out of the sweep of the wind. The lagoon was covered with black-necked swans and other wild/36
fowl; so, as soon as the horses had been unloaded and looked

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when, as often happened, he joined our little circle, and in the company of his old friend Mr. Clarke, unbent from his gravity and laughed and talked in a way that seemed quite foreign to the usually serious chief. It must be confessed that he was jealous and suspicious, and a little stingy, preferring to increase rather than lessen his large stock of horses, gear, and arms; but from the time I became his guest his conduct to myself was irreproachable.

In the evening the messenger returned; he had of course completely mistaken his instructions, and informed Don Luiz that the Englishman desired to proceed in the schooner to Buenos Ayres, and accordingly a boat arrived with the morning flood-tide to take me off. Mr. Clarke good-naturedly undertook to go himself and explain matters; and returned with a kind message, offering me quarters and every hospitality if I chose to remain in the settlement for the next two months, at the end of which period the schooner might be expected to return. Lieut. Gallegos strongly urged me to accompany him back to Punta Arena, painting in strong colours the tedium and discomfort of a winter at Santa Cruz. But it was plain that the opportunity of cultivating the acquaintance and securing the confidence of Orkeke would thus be thrown away, and with it the prospect of traversing the country. Gallegos believed that this plan was fraught with danger, and indeed almost certain destruction; but as I was immovable, we took an affectionate farewell of each other. He and all his party had treated me, an utter stranger, with the greatest kindness, and I bade adieu to them as true comrades. They departed on their return journey, taking with them the four prisoners, who, however, are destined to appear again in these pages. These men had undergone much hardship to obtain the liberty of which they seemed again deprived; three of them had managed to secure a horse, and walking and riding in turns had found their way to the Indians. Two of them, Olate and Rosa, the latter, though a mere boy, with a thoroughly evil and murderous coun-

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133 which, invisible to our eyes, lay our destination, viz., the toldos of Cheoeque. For weeks Las Manzanas and Cheoeque had been almost the sole topic of conversation, and the general excitement, which had been intense at starting, now cul-
782 minated at the sight of our distant bourne. As we halted the Indians all raised their hands to their foreheads, saluting the distant river, and inviting the Spirit of the locality to be propitious to our undertaking, as to the issue of which there was great uncertainty. The night before Casimiro had
787 pointed out the redness of the setting sun, and declared it to be an omen of war; but without paying attention to the omen, which indeed was not perceptible to my eyes, the unprecedented visit of 250 Tehuelches ostensibly for peace might very possibly be otherwise understood by Cheoeque: indeed, it afterwards appeared that he, in reality, was by no means assured of our pacific intentions.

122 When all were collected and prepared to descend the mountain, it transpired that Casimiro, who had been missing since the hunt commenced, had, in company with several other Tehuelches and Foyel's Indians, returned to drink. This was very annoying, and all present united in abusing him for setting such an example when about to enter a part of the country whither we were going on sufferance, amongst a not remarkably friendly-disposed set of people. We halted
372 after nightfall in a valley at the side of a small rapid stream, the banks of which, for a short distance, were covered with high tussocks of broad-leaved pampa grass, amidst the shelter of which we bivouacked, although the night was cold and frosty. Firewood was plentiful, supplied by drift-wood brought down by winter or spring floods, so with blazing fires and under the lee of the pampa grass we slept warmly enough. It was necessary, however, to keep a sharp look-out on the horses, as pasturage was scanty. Before daylight, after a
133 slight consultation, Guenalto was given chief command, and we again started; after following a winding valley for a short distance and scrambling up a steep slope, we continued

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were greater; but I am obliged, after all, to leave the question about where I found it, so far as *certain* conclusions are concerned. Yet some circumstances occurred, or were related to me, that incline my mind strongly to the belief that such horrible practices are not unjustly ascribed to them. Of the soundness of my conclusions those who follow the course of the narrative will have the opportunity of judging for themselves; if such had been my persuasion at the beginning, it may be readily imagined what effect this last hazard would have had upon my feelings, in contemplating the possibilities of the future. Happily a convenient scepticism on this point preserved me from this dark apprehension.

I came among these people not, certainly, with the best preparation in my previous habits and associations to endure either the climate of the country or the hardships of captivity. I went on shore in my usual ship's dress; thick frock coat, trousers, and shoes, and glazed cap. My undergarments were woollen; though an important item, as before related, was made way with in fruitlessly signalling vessels in the straits. But to live without any change of dress, to sleep without any additional covering, protected from the cold ground only by a fragment of guanaco-hide, and the other discomforts and exposures of life among savages, made, altogether, a harsh contrast to the comforts of our good schooner. To these, however, I gradually became inured, till I was able to meet cold and wet and storm with as stoical indifference as my dark companions, who had known no other lot from infancy.

Of the character of the natives I had little previous knowledge; and that little was not adapted to stimulate

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curiosity, or prompt the least anxiety for more intimate acquaintance. It was derived mainly from whalers, in whom it seemed to have produced much the same degree of contentment, — a feeling that ignorance is bliss. Indeed, the greatest caution has always been employed by voyagers in regard to landing on these shores; many experienced seamen cannot be persuaded to land at all; trade with the natives is always carried on in boats off shore, frequently with loaded fire-arms constantly levelled, in readiness for action in case of emergency. But here I was, put forcibly to the study of their character in the school of dame Experience, and can testify to the truth of the saying that she charges roundly for tuition. Let the reader give me credit for the cheapness with which I put him in possession of what knowledge was purchased at so exorbitant a price